

**CLEAN VERSION OF AMENDED ABSTRACT****ABSTRACT OF DISCLOSURE**

Phthalic anhydride is prepared by catalytic gas-phase oxidation of xylene and/or naphthalene by a gas comprising molecular oxygen in a fixed bed at elevated temperature and using at least three coated catalysts arranged in superposed zones, which catalysts have a layer of catalytically active metal oxides applied to a core of support material. In the process described, the catalyst activity rises from zone to zone from the gas inlet end to the gas outlet end and the activity of the catalysts of the individual zones is set such that the least active catalyst comprises a lower amount of active composition and, if desired, additionally more alkali metal selected from the group consisting of potassium, rubidium and cesium as dopant than the catalyst of the next zone and the subsequent even more active catalyst comprises the same amount of active composition and even less alkali metal as dopant or a greater amount of active composition and, if desired, less alkali metal as dopant than the catalyst of the second zone, with further conditions.